

MA THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART

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PRESS RELEASE

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MAJOR RETROSPECTIVE OF W. EUGENE SMITH, LEGENDARY PHOTOJOURNALIST
TO OPEN AT THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART
December 2, 1987 - January 24, 1988

Always, I want to comment with 'reasoned' passion. Passion, yes, for passion is in all great searches and it is necessary to all creative endeavor. . . I am a compassionate cynic, yet I believe I am one of the most affirmative photographers around. I have tried to let truth be my prejudice. It has taken much sweat. It has been worth it.

So said W. Eugene Smith (1918-1978), a brilliant and uncompromising American photographer whose most famous photographic essays affected generations of people around the world, although most would not have recognized his name. W. Eugene Smith: Let Truth Be the Prejudice, on view at The Cleveland Museum of Art from December 2, 1987, through January 24, 1988, presents the full range of his achievement for the first time since his death. Two hundred fifty black-and-white master prints--some never before on view to the public--include images from such celebrated series as "Country Doctor" (1948), "Spanish Village" (1950), "Nurse Midwife" (1951), "A Man of Mercy" (1954), "Pittsburgh" (1955-56), and "Minamata" (1971-75). The project is the culmination of more than thirty years of preparation and research, initially guided by Smith and continued after his death by the three principal institutions involved: Aperture, Inc., the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the Center for Creative Photography, Tucson, Arizona.

Tom Hinson, curator of contemporary art at the Museum, comments: "Smith's work shows a consistency of vision and concern, brilliance and inspiration

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throughout his career, from the horrific pictures of World War II to the mother bathing her daughter at Minamata--as telling an image as any he did. His pictures attract the viewer on many different levels." W. Eugene Smith, born in Wichita, Kansas, took his first photograph at the age of nine, beginning a career that lasted almost five decades. He regularly published photographs in the Wichita Eagle and Wichita Beacon as a teenager; he sold his first picture to the New York Times at fifteen. By the age of twenty, he was a staff photographer for Newsweek. Working sporadically on the staff of Life, he also contributed to Collier's, Parade, Harper's Bazaar, Sports Illustrated, and Popular Photography, and served as Special Medical Reportage Editor to Visual Medicine magazine.

He let his subjects unfold gradually and quietly, avoiding the easy, melodramatic shot which he felt was all too common in the picture press. Smith's photographs of World War II in the Pacific reveal the horror and anonymity of unburied corpses, the exhaustion of troops, and the terror and desolation of civilians whose lives had been irrevocably changed. He captured intense moments of command decision, plane crews preparing for combat missions, and the giant carrier U.S.S. Bunker Hill under attack; he created some of the most dramatic aviation photographs of World War II. He was severely wounded in Okinawa in 1945 after covering thirteen invasions and twenty-three combat missions.

His first picture after a two-year recuperation from injuries was "The Walk to Paradise Garden"--by design a direct contrast to his war photographs in its affirmation of life--featuring two of his children; it became the final image in Edward Steichen's 1955 Family of Man exhibition and book. His career soared in 1948 when Life published "Country Doctor," an eleven-page spread for

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which he spent four weeks shadowing Dr. Robert Ceriani on his exhausting rounds, as well as during his rare moments of leisure. In 1950 he photographed the working-class citizens of Wales at the time of England's election, and the people of the poor Spanish village of Deleitosa.

While traveling through North Carolina he infiltrated a Ku Klux Klan rally to record haunting images of hatred, fear, and bigotry at work--an experience that surely affected his next story, of the black nurse-midwife Maude Callen, whom Smith described as the greatest person he'd known. This photo-essay, which Smith expected to be "banned in Boston and hated in the South," as well as criticized for depicting labor and childbirth, prompted donations of \$18,500 for Callen to establish a clinic. His 1954 photographs of Albert Schweitzer's leper colony at Lambarene in French Equatorial Africa present Dr. Schweitzer's hard work along with the flow of daily village life, the humorous along with the dreadful.

With the first of three Guggenheim Fellowships he received, he made some of the finest urban landscapes: his Pittsburgh pictures, taken over three years beginning in 1955, show the city as a living entity, from the sweat and glare on workmen's faces to a child perched on a street sign to the factory smoke, steam, and soot which meant prosperity. His visits to Haiti in 1958 and 1959 to photograph the poor treatment of mental patients there resulted in a broader series on Haitian society, including events inside the palace of President François "Papa Doc" Duvalier. Smith, who listened to music all day long and much of the night, insisting it was the strongest influence on his work, also photographed classical and popular recording artists, jazz musicians, and folk singers.

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His pictures of Minamata, Japan where mercury poisoning from the Chisso chemical factory's waste affected 10,000 people, are the culmination of his attempts to use photography to right injustice, and they typify his careful, sometimes startling compositions which place the photographer in the same physical and emotional space as his subjects. Begun in 1971, the series shows some of the most severely crippled victims as well as confrontations between local protestors and company representatives, and influenced the company to stop the pollution. Smith often worked at great personal risk; severe head injuries inflicted by the chemical factory workers during a demonstration ultimately contributed to his death in 1978.

Smith's masterful printmaking talents will be evident to many who have known his work only through publication: the distinctive tonality of black shadows and dramatic highlights--often handbleached--and the smoothness of grain often achieved by printing through silk and other diffusers.

The exhibition W. Eugene Smith is accompanied by a 240-page catalogue published by Aperture, Inc., containing 250 duotone reproductions. The first comprehensive survey of Smith's master prints, it includes an illustrated biography by Ben Maddow, highlights from his major photo-essays, and a bibliography. It is available in the Museum bookstore for \$30 (\$25.50 to Museum members).

The exhibition was organized by the Alfred Stieglitz Center of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where it opened in October 1985, in association with the Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, which has lent almost all of the images in the exhibition. Some images in the Minamata series were lent by his wife, Aileen, who helped Smith with that project. It has also been on view at the International Center of Photography, New York;

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the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; the Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth; the High Museum, Atlanta; and the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. From Cleveland, it will travel to the Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Alberta (August 27-October 23, 1988), and the Indianapolis Museum of Art (December 3, 1988-January 29, 1989), before closing at the Center for Creative Photography, Tucson (February 25-April 23, 1989).

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For additional information or photographs, please contact the Public Information Office, The Cleveland Museum of Art, 11150 East Boulevard, Cleveland, Ohio 44106; 216/421-7340.